

**17TH ASIA SECURITY SUMMIT**  
**THE IISS SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE**

**FIFTH PLENARY SESSION**

**RAISING THE BAR FOR REGIONAL SECURITY**  
**COOPERATION**

**SUNDAY 3 JUNE 2018**

**FLORENCE PARLY,**  
**MINISTER OF THE ARMED FORCES, FRANCE**

**Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces, France**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear Dr Chipman, dear colleagues, fellow ministers, excellencies, my dear friends. It is an honour for me to attend the famous Shangri-La Dialogue for the first time. I had been told of the privilege it was to address such an audience, but the reality exceeds the warning, of course. I would like to thank IISS, one of the very best think tanks in the marketplace, for the fantastic organisation.

I would also like to thank Singapore, our host. Singapore is a friend and distinguished strategic partner in the region. We have cooperation that far exceeds what most people know. Among others, in just a few weeks, Prime Minister Lee along with Prime Minister Abe will attend French National Day at the invitation of President Macron. We will celebrate 20 years of an intense partnership between our air forces.

It is also my particular pleasure to sit side by side with my friend Gavin on this panel. Yes, Gavin and I bicker every now and then over Brexit. The exchange goes something like this: 'Florence, we broke free'; and I, 'Gavin, you are freely broke'. However, despite this minute difference, I cannot restate enough that Britain is our friend. Britain is our neighbour, our partner, our ally. When we meet here in Asia, we may no longer be part of the same European club, but still we share something of very deep significance: vision, strength, values and a willingness to project them.

This is not only a statement; it is also a reality. Those who saw our joint strikes in Syria can testify. This also will become self-evident in this region when you see our maritime task group, with British helicopters and indeed British ships in it, calling to port in Singapore next week and sailing together to certain areas – I mean those areas where at some point a stern voice intrudes into the transponder and tells us to sail away from supposedly territorial waters, but our commander then calmly replies that he will sail forth because these, under international law, are indeed international waters.

I am also delighted to be here because this region for us, too, is home. It is good to remember that France has nine million square kilometres of exclusive economic zone in the Indo-Pacific area, 1.5 million citizens in our five overseas territories, 200,000 expatriates, different sets of permanent military forces and vital economic interests in the region.

Now, on 'Raising the Bar for Regional Cooperation': there could not be a more fitting topic today. Actually, an observer who would have come here today and read hastily the title might have understood 'Raising the Bar for Regional Competition'. That might have been, sadly, a better reflection of some of the dynamics at stake. Fortunately, there are also some promising elements of cooperation, and I will dwell upon them.

Last year, one of the issues that dominated the debates was the situation in the South China Sea. True enough, this will and should remain a key concern this year. But there is more. We are convening here in this very place, Singapore, just ten days before a groundbreaking summit involving North Korea will take place – or will not take place, or will take place, or will not, or we are no longer sure. Anyway, surprise is part of the art of the deal, so we should let ourselves be surprised. Eventually, we all hope, the summit will take place if the right conditions are met.

There is a good reason for this. Seen from a French angle, we see three overarching security challenges in the region. Firstly, I would mention nuclear proliferation. The development of the North Korean nuclear programme has long been a serious threat, and it has accelerated dramatically in the last few years. Meanwhile, international pressure was really struggling to keep up. France, as a member of the P5, has always had a very strong stance on this issue, as on all proliferation cases. We have been at the forefront of UN and EU sanctions. Of course, we have observed with great interest the recent moments of enthusiasm on the inter-Korean dialogue and the gestures made by Pyongyang.

But experience from the past on DPRK suggests that if you want to deal with this issue, you must be ready to endure regularly a cold shower. There was one at almost each important juncture. So, when Pyongyang recently gave the impression that, after all, the DPRK might not be really ready to embark on what specialists call CVID (comprehensible, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement), then someone pressed the button, and here was the cold shower again. Ever since, it seemed that an army of distinguished plumbers have been at work on both sides of the Pacific Ocean to restart the heater, and maybe it will be warm again. That is definitely what we hope.

The second challenge I see is the respect of international maritime law. Everyone knows that some of the waterways are crucial for the economic security of a number of states in the region; they are actually essential for the economic security of many states outside the region too. Their importance to individual states does not give these states a right to bypass international maritime law. France is not part of the territorial disputes in the area, nor will it be, but we insist on two principles of the rules-based international order: disputes should be resolved by legal means and negotiation, not by *fait accompli*; and freedom of navigation must be upheld.

The third challenge I see is terrorism. Terror has struck France and Europe repeatedly over the last few years and has not spared the Indo-Pacific. South and Southeast Asia have been badly hit, too. The recent attacks in Afghanistan and Indonesia are a tragic reminder that terrorism still hurts and kills everywhere, all over the globe. Facing the same threat, we should work together, deepen our cooperation and send a strong message: there will be no safe haven.

If we take these three challenges – and I hope you will recognise with me that they are really crucial – it would be too easy to see the limits of cooperation. Yes, there is cooperation on the North Korean case, but how tight is it? Are sanctions always scrupulously enforced? It seems that North Korean tankers are regularly having nightly rendezvous with tankers of unknown origins, after which they come back loaded, is the least I can say. Also, in the diplomatic extravaganza we have seen lately, with delegations travelling to more places in a few weeks than they have in decades, how much is cooperation and how much is competition between contending regions and interests?

The same goes with upholding international maritime law. As we see profound asymmetries developing in the region, we see that non-cooperative solutions are becoming even more likely. This should be a cause to ponder, and to worry. Just because the floodlights are on Panmunjom right now, does not mean that the South China Sea issue will go away. Recent events have alerted us to that.

The fight against terror is no exception; here also, cooperation has been wanting. No one had really anticipated the incredible storming of Marawi. When addressing this phenomenon, we must also reckon with different perspectives in the region. Sure, everyone has their terrorists, but they are not always the same. That is a serious limit on cooperation. What is a Taliban? If you ask me, in most cases, it is a terrorist, but ask someone else, it might be some kind of freedom fighter, or maybe even a proxy. So, where is the space for cooperation then?

We cannot be satisfied with that. Take a longer view and consider the future of the region. I do not like to muse on the infamous Thucydides Trap, but there is a truth in this: when the balance of power changes, it is not the power we lose, but the balance. The risks are too big for us to passively accept them. The government I represent today passionately believes in multilateralism, not in some kind of blue-eyed wishful thinking, but rather a single-minded effort, backed if necessary by robust measures and a sense of reciprocity to address issues through patient negotiation. This was the message President Macron delivered when he spoke in the US Congress, and more recently when he travelled to Australia early in May.

How does this apply to the region? Let me start with upholding the rule of law in maritime matters. France fully supports a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, which should be legally binding, comprehensive, effective and consistent with international law. We believe negotiations are the way to go. Meanwhile, we should be very clear that *fait accompli* is not the *fait accepté*. I mentioned British helicopters and ships joining our task group when it sails through the South China Sea; no less than five French ships sailed in this region in 2017. Europeans have started to mobilise more widely in support of this endeavour. German observers have embarked on our ships, too. I believe we should broaden this effort even further.

The same logic applies to the fight against terror, crime, trafficking. The circumstances of France's recent history have given us the dubious benefit of having a lot of experience with fighting terror, be it on our own soil, in the Near East or even Africa. We are eager to share our best practice with partners. We play an active role in operations against illegal trafficking, and we have made a particular effort in the establishment of a network of maritime surveillance. We pursue a remarkable cooperation with Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific, in relation to the United States and the Quad group, in consultation with small island states like Fiji, PNG and Tonga, in the framework of the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting.

Regarding North Korea, France will continue to play a major role in the United Nations Security Council and within the European Union, to avoid any increase of instability and any escalation in relation to our partners in the region, especially South Korea and Japan. We welcome the signs of openness and the new priority put forward by the DPRK on economic development. Sanctions targeting North Korea's illicit activities have produced their effects. But we will not be naïve. We will not lower our guard. Opposite, we should make sure the implementation of sanctions is absolutely robust until CVID – that barbarous acronym – can be finally achieved.

We should look beyond all these traditional man-made calamities and anticipate further risks. I am talking of another kind of man-made calamity: climate change. Its security consequences could be huge. In the Indo-Pacific, the risks are significant that some countries could disappear in a few decades because of the sea level rising. Ever more frequent extreme weather events will create new security vulnerabilities. France is seeking to work with all the countries of the Indo-Pacific on an innovative approach to reduce the impact of climate change by anticipating the risk and setting up preventive measures. This will be a collaborative endeavour, and we look forward to working with all of you on this.

A final word on partnership now. To address such pressing, such serious issues, partnerships need to be rooted on solid ground – I mean friendship, values, democracy. As for France, we have started to build a very strong Indo-Pacific partnership. It is based on our fantastic relationships with Australia and India. With New Delhi and Canberra, we have a community of vision, a security partnership and a commitment to multilateralism.

I should also mention Japan, with whom our strategic interests are aligned, and we share an exceptional bond. Narrowing down the focus to Southeast Asia, France has developed a strategic partnership with our wonderful host, Singapore, based on trust and fuelled by cooperation on defence, research and technology, but also with Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries. Of course, we embrace the important regional institutions such as ASEAN, whose centrality is a key dual strategic parameter, and bodies like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting, with which France is hoping to increase its cooperation. As a maritime-security provider, France is also willing to join as soon as possible the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy in Asia.

In our mind, all those partnerships have to be inclusive. So, as a matter of conclusion, I would like to recall a former prominent American politician who once said, 'There is no limit to what a man can achieve, if he does not care who gets the credit'. This, in a sense, is how we see the challenges in the region. Faced with so many gathering clouds, only a patient, collective, selfless effort can rein in the passions, prove Thucydides wrong, uphold rules, disarm the climate and show that, yes, we can raise the bar rather than the flag.

Thank you very much for your attention.